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ABSTRACT

A study examined the differential grading that occurs in the basic speech communication classroom and attempted to identify predictors for the differences in the grades that male and female students receive. Subjects, 47 women and 48 men enrolled in the same lecture section of a basic communication course at a small private midwestern college, completed the Personal Attributes Questionnaire and indicated their sex on the instruments. Each subject's final grade in the course, ACT score, and high school grade point average were obtained from college records. Analysis of the results indicated that when the effects of classroom context and abilities are removed, biological sex is still a significant predictor of grade in the speech communication course, but psychological sex, or sex type, is not. Two possible explanations for these results--that women are more effective oral communicators than men, or that evaluators respond more favorably to the same communication skills when they are demonstrated by women--are currently being studied. (JL)

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SEX DISCRIMINATION IN GRADING IN THE BASIC COURSE?: REMOVING POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS FOR DIFFERENCES

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SEX DISCRIMINATION IN GRADING IN THE BASIC COURSE?: REMOVING POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS FOR DIFFERENCES

Abstract

This study examines the differential grading that occurs in the basic speech communication classroom and attempts to identify predictors for the differences in the grades that male and female students receive. When the effects of the classroom context, as measured by previous academic evaluation, and the abilities or aptitudes of the students, as measured by standardized tests, are removed, sex differences still remain. Biological sex, rather than psychological sex type, appears to provide the most parsimonious explanation for discrimination in grading between men and women.

Communication educators have demonstrated a continuing interest in the relationship between grading and gender in the basic speech communication course. Some of this concern arises from the possibility of bias and the need for objectivity in the classroom. Researchers have been interested in the interaction between the biological sex of the instructor and the biological sex of the student, the influence of the student's psychological sex type on his or her grades, and the sexist bias of the instructor affecting his or her grading patterns.

The student's gender appears to affect his or her evaluation in the basic course. Women receive higher ratings than do men on public speeches (Barker, 1966; Pearson, 1980b, 1981a); female speakers appear to receive more positive comments than do male speakers, even when grades are held constant (Sprague, 1971; Pearson, 1975); and female speakers obtain significantly higher scores on three dimensions of credibility--trustworthiness, competence, and dynamism--than do male speakers (Vigliano, 1974). Women receive higher grades in the basic speech communication course, regardless if the course is theoretical or performance-oriented (Pearson, 1982). Similarly, women receive higher grades in the basic communication course, regardless if the course has an interpersonal communication focus or a public speaking focus (Pearson & Nelson, 1982).

How can we account for these differences that appear to be consistent and across a variety of contexts? We might speculate that women are better communicators than are their male counterparts. Some research would support this point. Stereotypical feminine

traits include warmth and expressiveness (cf. Bem, 1974; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975) and a recent research report demonstrates that these characteristics are reflected in female behavior (Gillen & Sherman, 1980). Women perceive themselves as more attentive in interpersonal communication (Talley & Richmond, 1980), and they have been repeatedly shown to be more sensitive to the cues that others have offered (cf., Argyle, Salter, Nicholson, Williams & Burgess, 1970; Rosenthal, Archer, Koivumaki, Di Matteo & Rogers, 1974).

At the same time, men appear to exhibit some potentially positive communication traits. For instance, men tend to pro-act while women are more likely to react (Strodtbeck & Mann, 1956). Men talk more frequently and they talk for longer periods of time when they have the floor (Eakins & Eakins, 1978; Zimmerman & West, 1975). Men tend to order, command, interrogate and declare while women comply, acquiesce, reply and agree (cf., Eakins & Eakins, 1978). Finally, men are generally rated higher on dynamism than are females (Widgery, 1974; Pearson, 1981b).

Both men and women have communication skills that can be useful within and outside the classroom situation. Women tend to be superior in verbal skills and to be more responsive and sensitive to others while men tend to be more assertive and initiating in their behavior. Men and women appear to have different abilities, but it is not clear that women are "naturally" better than men in their communication skills.

An alternative explanation for the differences in grading patterns that are found in the basic course is that women are

generally more compliant than men. The classroom setting in which previous research has been conducted might affect the evaluations that occur. Instructors may favor students who are compliant, yielding, and responsive rather than independent, strong, and self-sufficient. At the same time, differing contexts might mitigate against compliance and in favor of assertive, initiating and domineering communicators.

A final explanation for the different grades that men and women receive may lie in differing responses to speakers, based on their biological differences. Personality traits, attitudes, and predispositions of the evaluator appear to affect evaluation. One researcher demonstrated that rigid evaluators tended to rate speakers lower than did persons who were non-rigid (Bostrom, 1964). Another study showed that people who are difficult to persuade rated speakers lower than did raters who were easy to persuade (Bock, 1970). The question of differential criticism was moved from one of sex differences to one of sex role and sexism differences by another researcher (Pearson, 1980b). She found that a predicted interaction between androgyny and the sex of the evaluator yielded only a trend, but that a predicted and confirmed main effect demonstrated that sexist evaluators are more harsh than are nonsexist evaluators. Rigidity, difficulty in prsuasibility, and sexism appear to be among the evaluator characteristics that may affect the speech evaluation process. While earlier research suggested that sexism might predict differential grading (Sprague, 1971; Pearson, 1975), the more recent research demonstrates that sexism has weak explanatory power (Pearson, 1980b).

Attempts at explaining differential grading in the basic speech communication classroom have been foiled by methodological difficulties. For instance, the influence of the classroom context has not been examined because all of the studies have been performed in high school or college classrooms (cf. Sprague, 1971; Pearson, 1975, 1980a, 1980b, 1981a; Hayes, 1977; Bock, Powell, Kitchens & Flavin, 1976). At the same time, it is difficult to make meaningful comparisons between the successfulness of speakers in the classroom and the success of political speakers, for instance. Too many intervening varibles render such comparisons meaningless. Assessments of students' differential abilities have not been partialled out in past research. It is not clear whether women and men have received different scores because of their differing skills. Last, studies which have considered sexism as a potential explanation for different grades may be flawed. In these studies, persons recorded their attitudes about women and men on a self-report instrument. The social acceptability of nonsexist responses may have affected the results that occurred. In other words, responding that women and men should have the same opportunties for any professional or occupational choice that they select may have been salient and viewed as the "correct" response, regardless of the individual's actual attitude. Different results may have occurred if the purpose of the instrument had been more thoroughly masked. Sexism may be viewed as a negative attitude which cannot be measured directly through self-report instruments.

This study represents an initial effort in untangling the question of differential grading in the speech communication classroom. Three potential explanations exist for the differences that have been determined. Women may receive higher scores in the basic speech communication classroom because they generally receive higher grades in their educational endeavors. In order to eliminate this explanation, we will determine students' high school grade point averages and control for them. Women may receive higher scores in the basic course because they have more ability than do men. In order to remove this potential explanation, we will identify students' scores on the A. C. T. and remove the students' determined abilities as measured by this standardized test. Finally, we will attempt to determine if biological sex or psychological sex type offers the best explanation for sex differences that occur in the classroom. In order to examine these variables, two research questions are framed:

Q_1: Does biological sex predict final grades in the speech communication classroom when past academic evaluation and demonstrated abilities are removed as predictors?

Q_2: Does psychological sex-type predict final grades in the speech communication classroom when past academic evaluation and demonstrated abilities are removed as predictors?

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects in this study were 47 women and 48 men who were randomly selected from the basic undergraduate speech

communication course at a small, private midwestern college. This particular university offered a basic course which combined intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, small group communication, and public speaking. The course included a theoretical and a performance component. Grades in the course were based on students' performances and written examinations.

Procedure

All of the subjects were enrolled in the same lecture section of the basic course. Each subject completed the Personal Attributes Questionnaire and recorded his or her sex on the instrument. Each subjects' final grade in the basic speech communication course, his or her ACT score, and his or her high school grade point average were obtained from the college records.

Instrumentation

In order to determine the students' psychological sex type, the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1974) was administered to the students. The PAQ has items that differentiate between the sexes stereotypically and on self-report. This scale identifies persons who are low or high on masculinity and low or high on femininity. The self-report instrument has 24 trait descriptions set up on a five-point bipolar scale. The questionnaire is divided into three separate eight-item scales, labeled Masculinity (M), Femininity (F), and Masculinity-Femininity (M-F). The Masculinity scale

includes items males are believed to possess in greater abundance than females, e.g., independence, competitiveness; the Femininity scale includes items that females possess to a greater degree than males, e.g., gentleness, helpfulness; and the Masculinity-Femininity scale depicts characteristics whose social desirability appears to vary in the two sexes, e.g., submission is judged to be desirable in females and dominance is desirable in males. Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp report internal consistency, discriminant validity, and reliability (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975).

Design

A 2 X 4 analysis of covariance design was utilized. The two independent variables were biological sex with two levels and pscyhological sex with four levels (masculine people who responded that they were high in masculine traits and low in feminine traits; feminine people who responded that they were high in feminine traits and low in masculine traits; androgynous people who responded that they were high in both masculine and feminine traits; and undifferentiated persons who responded that they were low in both masculine and feminine traits). The dependent measure was the final grade received in the speech communication course. Because prior academic evaluation was assumed to be predictive of current academic evaluation, the students' high school grade point averages served as one covariate. Similarly, because verbal skills and other measurable aptitudes was believed to be predictive of evaluation in the basic speech communication course, the students' ACT scores served as a second covariate.

RESULTS

Complete data for 95 subjects was available for analysis in this study. The dependent measure, final grade in the speech communication class, the independent measures, sex and sex type, and the covariates, ACT score and high school GPA, were determined for each of the subjects. Both of the covariates accounted for a significant amount of variance in the students' speech communication grade. The high school grade point average appears to account for more variance ($F = 10.15$, $df = 1$, $p < .002$) than did the ACT score ($F = 3.70$, $df = 1$, $p < .055$). When these sources of variation were removed, biological sex was found to be a significant predictor of grade in the speech communication course ($F = 6.09$, $df = 1$, $p < .015$), but psychological sex, or sex type, was not ($F = .82$, $df = 3$, $p < .487$). An interaction between sex and sex type was not found ($F = .72$, $df = 3$, $p < .547$) which allows us to meaningfully interpret the significance of the main effect, sex. Table 1 provides the complete analysis of covariance.

-- INSERT TABLE 1 HERE --

The final speech communication grades given to students classified by sex and sex tpe are provided in Table 2. The grades are translated into a numerical scale in which 12 = A+, 11 = A, 10 = A-, 9 = B+, 8 = B, 7 = B-, etc. Grade inflation, which has been discussed by many educators, is evidenced in this table. More important, for our purposes, is the picture that is provided of differential grading

between women and men. Masculine and undifferentiated women receive the highest grades (an average of A-), followed by androgynous women (slightly below A-), feminine women (slightly above a B+), feminine men (B+ average), masculine men (slightly below a B+), undifferentiated men (below a B+), and androgynous men (slighly below a B average).

-- INSERT TABLE 2 HERE --

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrated that male and female students receive significantly different grades in the basic speech communication course. When the predictive value of prior academic evaluation, as measured by the students' high school grade point average, and skills and aptitudes, as measured by the students' ACT scores, are removed, men and women still receive significantly different grades. These differences appear to hold true for biological sex; they were not demonstrated for psychological sex. This study suggests that the higher grades that women receive in the basic speech communication course across a number of communication contexts including interpersonal communication and public speaking, across different orientations in the course including theoretical and skills-oriented courses, do not appear to be a result of the classroom context or the educational setting, nor do they appear to be based on the differences among the students in verbal or other abilities.

Prior studies have demonstrated fairly consistently that men and women receive different grades in the basic speech communication course. The explanation for these differences have included stereotypical characteristics of women and men. Women's stereotypical qualities including compliance, warmth, empathy, and responsiveness contrasted with men's stereotypical characteristics such as independence, assertiveness, outspokeness, and analytical skills suggested that the female characteristics allowed one to communicate more effectively. In this study, psychological sex type which includes these stereotypical characteristics did not yield significant differences among the four sex role groups. The sample size may have contributed to the lack of signifcant findings; nonetheless, biological sex appears to be more parsimonious in explaining discrimination in grading.

Men and women receive different grades in the basic speech communication course. Women generally receive higher grades than their male counterparts. The differences in grades between men and women cannot be explained on the basis of prior academic evaluation, on the basis of aptitudes measured by a standardized test, or on the basis of stereotypical masculine and feminine characteristics. The differences may lie in differences in male and female behavior when communicating in the classroom or in differences in the perception of men and women engaging in communication activities in the classroom. In other words, women may be more effective

oral communicators than men, regardless of the two groups' aptitudes as measured on a written test. Or, evaluators may respond more favorably to the same communication skills when they are demonstrated by women than when they are demonstrated by men. These two potential explanations are being examined in a study which is in progress.

Speech communication researchers should continue to conduct research which examines sex variables in the evaluation that occurs in classroom settings. The relational messages that are implicit in sex discrimination in grading may have more lasting value to students than do the content messages that communication educators offer. Basic course objectives should be considered in terms of the gender differences that exist among basic course students. Our goal in this area might be to accurately describe, explain, and predict valid and reliable speech communication evaluation.

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Table 1 Analysis of Covariance for Sex and Sex Type for Grades in the Basic Speech Communication Course with ACT scores and High School Grade Point Averages Entered as Covariates

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Significance of F
Covariates	101.93	2	50.97	21.94	.000
ACT	8.60	1	8.60	3.70	.055
High School GPA	23.58	1	23.58	10.15	.002
Main Effects	19.33	4	4.83	2.08	.089
Sex	14.16	1	14.16	6.09	.015
Sex Type	5.75	3	1.91	0.82	.487
2-Way Interactions (Sex X Sex Type)	5.01	3	1.67	0.72	.547
Explained	126.27	9	14.03	6.04	.000
Residual	197.45	85	2.32		
Total	323.73	94	3.44		

Table 2 Grades given to Students Classified by Sex and Sex Type

Group	Mean Grade ($\bar{X}$)	Number (n)
Masculine Women	10.00	9
Undifferentiated Women	10.00	1
Androgynous Women	9.83	6
Feminine Women	9.35	31
Feminine Men	9.00	4
Masculine Men	8.96	27
Undifferentiated Men	8.75	8
Androgynous Men	7.67	9

Mean Grade:

10 = A-

9 = B+

8 = B

7 = B-